

Contact by The Comte of Saint-Nicholas

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Supernatural

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., M. Brenner, Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-13 05:21:49

Updated: 2017-11-28 06:31:59

Packaged: 2019-12-17 05:05:22

Rating: T

Chapters: 4

Words: 15,024

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: It's Hawkins Indiana, 1983, and a small poster in the Middle School AV room is advertising a job to Mike Wheeler and his friends. 'Wanted: Child not above the age of twelve with keen scientific interest and empathic nature for paid part-time work on cutting-edge scientific developments. Apply Hawkins Lab, IN. Hours non-negotiable.'

1. Chapter 1

Standard Disclaimer: I do not *Stranger Things*, the show upon which this was based. Bite me.

Hawkins National Laboratory, Hawkins, Indiana

1983

'Is she asleep?'

'Sedated. It was necessary.'

'That won't last forever.'

'Hopefully it will not have to.'

'Brenner, what the hell happened?'

'What I told you would happen from the start. Your precious timetable that you so eagerly cooked up with your friends in the Oval Office pushed her too hard. She snapped. She no longer trusts me.'

'*She killed two-*'

'I am well aware of what she did.'

'You said you could control her!'

'I could. Until now. I told you it was too early to try a repeat of the SDT.'

'We needed the results – we needed the breakthrough *you* promised us. The President expects quantifiable results, and the tension is only increasing. He's becoming paranoid the Soviets are trying to emulate our experiments.'

'Let them try. They'll never make them succeed. Mr Heathcote. Attend, for a moment, if you will. In the 1960s, in the heat of competition with our friends in the USSR, President Kennedy set his heart on landing a man on the moon – on landing a man on the moon

before the Soviets, and before the end of the 1960s.'

'Brenner, I'

'And so the Apollo program pushed and pushed, seeking *results*, and do you know what happened? In 1967, a fire broke out in the Apollo One cabin during a ground test, and all three pilots were killed. NASA investigated, and decided that in the future, all due care and safety should be put at the forefront of the project, rather than a gung-ho attempt at trailblazing which would inevitably end in another disaster.'

'You're saying?'

'I'm saying that this is our Apollo One, Mr Heathcote. And you can tell that to your friends in high places who want to know why we aren't giving them the results I promised. Tell them that if they stop thinking that they can run my experiment better than I can, we may start to make progress again. Who knows, we may even get our own moon landing. Apollo... Eleven.'

'Are you so sure about the girl? She's powerful sure, I think her demonstration earlier proved that, but she seems unreliable. We don't want her to blow up in our faces – well, we don't want her to blow up in our faces again. We don't need another 006.'

'We don't need another 005 either. Her power is what makes her valuable to us. We cannot crush her utility just to make her not dangerous. Besides, she is fundamentally emotional, something I have not been able to sterilise in her. It motivates her and it also controls her. So long as we control her emotional reins, she is no threat to the project or anyone working on it.'

'Tell that to the families of those two security guards I have to write letters to tonight.'

'I have explained twice to you already, Mr Heathcote. So long as I controlled her emotionally, she was malleable. Now I have had to be harsh with her one time too many, force her one time too many, and I have lost her trust in me. She needs someone else to trust in – someone else to follow. Someone who can convince her of their good

intentions but who will also be fundamentally working for us. Someone... untainted with the lab and its activities. Two years, Mr Heathcote, between 1967 and 1969. Two short years.'

'You're asking to hold the project for two years?'

'Don't be ridiculous. It is an analogy. My point is that I can get the project back on track. Quickly. I just need a complete free rein over the procedure and methods.'

'Back on track? How?'

'Recruit someone from outside – someone she will have never seen before. Someone like her. Someone she can relate to. Harness her emotionality, and channel it back into the project.'

'No promises, Brenner. You know I can't promise you anything. But... I'll see you get time. And control. And then you'd bloody well better deliver.'

'You need not concern yourself with that.'

'I still don't understand how this will help.'

'You are no longer required to understand. That is my problem. Now if you will excuse me, I'm sure you have two letters of condolence waiting to be written, and I have a flyer I need to draw up.'

Ω

Wanted: Child not above the age of twelve, with keen interest in science and ability to be discrete. Successful candidate must be empathic and will show initiative and ability to follow orders.

Apply for paid part-time work experience in national laboratory on cutting-edge scientific developments of a confidential nature. Hours non-negotiable. Apply by post to the Department of Energy, Hawkins National Laboratory, Hawkins, IN, addressed to Head of Personnel and Acquisitions. Expect interview and scientific/technical exam. Reference not required.

The four boys clustered excitedly around the small, muted poster that

had appeared on the wall of the AV room over the weekend, the radios momentarily forgotten.

'Holy shit,' said Dustin in awe. Lucas was squinting closely at the poster.

'Cutting-edge scientific developments of a confidential nature," he read. 'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

Dustin pushed past him to read the message again. 'I don't know, it doesn't say.'

'No kidding, dummy,' replied Lucas sharply, shoving Dustin out of the way again. 'That's what 'confidential' means'.

'Something so secret they don't even put it on the flyer,' said Mike in a low voice. 'What do you think it is?'

Will frowned. 'What kind of top-secret stuff would the Department of Energy be working on? They're not exactly the CIA or Homeland Security.'

'I don't know,' said Dustin warily. 'You can do all kinds of things with energy.'

'A new type of power source,' theorised Lucas. 'Nuclear energy – or something else entirely.'

'Or it could be how they're using it,' suggested Mike. 'What they're powering.'

'Why would either of those need a kid working on them?' asked Will in some confusion.

'Only one way to find out, I guess,' replied Dustin, gazing past the flyer into the middle distance. 'Paid work experience for working on top-secret science. I am so shooting for this.'

Mike looked around. 'We all should. All four of us.'

'Not me,' said Lucas gloomily. 'I turned thirteen last week. 'Not above twelve', it says.'

'Lie,' said Dustin immediately. Lucas rounded on him.

'You think they don't check these things? It's the government, man. They'll have records.'

Dustin was undeterred. 'School records? 'Cause I bet we could change those if we tried-'

'Nah, like birth certificates and stuff.'

'Pretend to be my cousin.'

'Which part of 'birth certificates' do you not get? Unless you're saying I'm your cousin who got left by the storks?'

'You could not know who your parents are. Like Luke Skywalker-'

'If I didn't know who my parents were I'd have bigger things to worry about than a job at Hawkins Lab!'

Mike ignored the squabble breaking out behind him and turned to Will. 'What do you think?' he asked.

'I'd have to check with my mom,' said Will thoughtfully. 'She's a bit clingy – and this is a whole part-time job. It'd take a lot of time.'

'Yeah, but if you could... would you go for it?'

Wil grinned at Mike. 'You bet I would.'

'Alright,' said Mike louder, turning back to the other two and shoving Lucas and Dustin away from each other. 'Shut up, you two! We're all going to do it. Lucas, you can't apply, but you can help us try and get in, and if we do we'll split everything. Money, information, secrets... whatever we get out of this we'll split four ways, deal?'

Dustin raised a finger. 'How much money? Because if I get this and it's a lot, my new X-Men comics are coming before you lot. Sorry.' Will smacked Dustin on the arm. 'Ow!'

'I don't know how much money this'll be,' mused Lucas. 'I can get a two quarters an hour for mowing old man Barker's lawn during

summer.'

'This is doing ground-breaking scientific research for the *government*,' said Mike emphatically. 'They're going to pay better than old man Barker.'

Dustin considered for a moment. 'Person doing the work gets a double share, how's that? That's fair, right?'

'I agree with Mike,' put in Will. 'It's like D&D. We split the loot evenly, no matter who does what. Lucas doesn't get extra XP for being the one who killed the Beholder last campaign. It's the same thing. We're a party.'

'We all killed the Beholder,' muttered Dustin, but his heart wasn't in it anymore. 'Alright, guys.'

'Great!' said Mike excitedly.

Lucas punched Dustin cheerfully on the shoulder. 'Only one of you're going to get the job anyhow, even if no one else does. You've just tripled your chances of making money from this.'

'Forget about the money,' said Mike in exasperation. 'This is so much more than that. *Cutting-edge scientific developments of a confidential nature.*' Just think what secrets are going to be stashed in that place.'

'It won't be easy to get in,' warned Will, looking over the flyer again. 'Interview, technical exam. You have to have initiative *and* obedience, whatever that means.'

Mike frowned. 'Empathic,' he read curiously. 'Why do you need to have empathy to work in a science lab?'

'Androids,' said Dustin suddenly, snapping his fingers in revelation. 'That's what it is. They're hardwiring robots-'

'And they need a kid to care about them?' finished Lucas sceptically. Dustin shrugged.

'Don't ask me how the government works.'

The bell rang suddenly, and all four of them started.

'Shit, we need to get to class,' said Dustin. They slung their bags over their shoulders and hurried to the door, where they paused.

'Dustin?' asked Will. Dustin was back by the wall, prying the flyer up and shoving it in his pocket.

'What?' he said, glancing up to see the other three staring at him. 'I'm showing initiative. The fewer people know about this, the better our chances are.'

'Oh, come on,' sighed Mike, and Dustin ran after them as they jogged to class, leaving the door to the empty AV room to slam shut behind them.

So I have plans for this fic but make absolutely no promises about how much or how often I will update. Because I never manage to keep them. Just a warning. For general reference, this is rated a T for canonically-consistent swearing, violence and cruelty to kittens. Still, should be fun, right?

2. Chapter 2

Standard Disclaimer: I do not own *Stranger Things*, the show upon which this was based. Sue me. Or rather, please, don't sue me. Please.

'I'm not sure about this.'

'Noted, Mr Heathcote.'

'Aren't we moving a bit fast, is all?'

'It's too late now. The flyers have gone out.'

'Don't sit there and try to convince me of that. After everything you've done in the name of the project, pulling a few flyers will be the least of your stunts. The flyers are still there because you want them there. This is all under your responsibility if it goes south.'

'Your faith in me is very touching.'

'I mean it, Brenner. We go to a lot of effort to ensure this lab remains inconspicuous. That's a lot of use if you blow us right into the open by advertising for a job in a middle school.'

'We can hardly conjure a child from thin air. We need some outreach.'

'You are very glib about this, Brenner.'

'Mr Heathcote, surely you have better things to do than stand in my office, enlightening though the running commentary is.'

'Don't get smart with me. Sometimes I think you forget who runs this building, who keeps you funded, who reports on *your* behaviour to our superiors.'

'Never for a moment, Mr Heathcote. Believe that.'

'Besides, how can you be sure there'll be a child suitable in the school? From what I hear, it's hardly award-winning.'

'It is the closest we can risk. We cannot advertise even county-wide without drawing too much attention to ourselves. We must confine ourselves to dealing locally and we will make it work with whatever we can get. The subject is hardly a socialite. Any outside contact will make an impression on her.'

'Humph. I suppose you're right.'

'Hold that though, Mr Heathcote.'

'Just... I'm not sure about this, is all.'

'Duly noted, as always.'

Ω

The Supercom in Mike's room let out a burst of crackling static and sprang to life with the voice of Dustin, excited and eager.

'Operative Two and Operative Three, come in. Operative Two and Operative Three, come in. Operative Two and Operative... Jesus, that's Mike and Will, okay? Mike's Operative Two and Will's... you know what, forget it, just pick up, will you? Over.'

Grinning, Mike pulled the Supercom over to him and replied. 'Operative Two coming in to Operative Four. What's the situation? Do you copy?'

'I'm Operative One.' The debatable connection mangled Dustin's whining even more. *'Lucas is Operative Four. Anyways, I got clearance. You?'*

'I'm working on it. After dinner.'

'Well, hurry up then, or someone else will get their application in first. Will, do you copy?'

Will's voice burst through. *'Loud and clear, Operative Four. I'm still waiting too. I'll tell you tomorrow at school.'*

'Agreed,' put in Mike. 'Tomorrow. Over and out.'

In the end, it was almost comically easy. Mike decided to wait until after dinner to talk to his parents about the possibility of applying to Hawkins Lab. Having thought it over, he decided to talk to his dad, not his mom – mainly because he was afraid that his mom would actually pay attention, whereas if he cornered his dad in the La-Z-Boy after supper Ted Wheeler was more likely to agree to anything without really listening just to get Mike to leave so he could close his eyes again. In Mike's book, it didn't matter if his parents realised they hadn't really agreed *after* he had got the job. By then, it would be sorted.

At 8:30, he poked his head out of his room and checked the coast.

Nancy – in her room, studying. Well, 'studying'. But she could be sucking up that jock Steve Harrington as much as she wanted if it kept her out of the way for Operation Application.

Mom – taking a bath. She normally enjoyed relaxing at this point in the day, before the stress of ensuring all the children were fully sound asleep, and Mike didn't expect her out for another half hour at least.

Holly – asleep for once, thank god. Though he wasn't sure how Holly being around would disrupt his plans. Never mind, disregard Holly.

And of course his dad, dozing in his La-Z-Boy in front of the TV. A sitting duck.

Mike carefully slipped out of his room, closing the door slowly so as not to make a *click*. He padded down the corridor, thankful not for the first time for his parents' belief in carpeting. Moving with an exaggerated quietness, he passed the corridor, navigated the stairs (inching along the edge by the wall where it was less likely to creak) and tiptoed through the kitchen, pressing his heel firmly onto the floor each step before putting weight on his toes. As he reached the living room he straightened up from his semi-crouch and immediately shifted gears, affecting a causal stroll. He paused in the door to the living room. The TV was off, for once, and Ted Wheeler was asleep with his open newspaper over his eyes, dozing. Mike

paused, screwing up his face into what he hoped was the right mix of eagerness and deference.

'Dad?' he asked quietly.

There was a pause.

'Dad?' he asked again. Then, 'Dad!'

With a snort, Mr Wheeler jolted back into consciousness. 'Bloody Mondale...' he mumbled. He blinked a moment. 'Michael?'

'Dad!' said Mike, before remembering his planned expression and hastily modifying his mood. 'Uh... Dad.'

Mr Wheeler rubbed a hand across his face tiredly, dislodging the paper. 'What are you doing down here? Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for bed?'

'Yes- in a moment. I just wanted to ask you something first.'

'Ask your mother, wherever she is.'

'She's in the bathroom. And- well, I wanted to talk to you, sort of, father to son. Is that okay?'

Mr Wheeler shifted slightly in a way that suggested he really wanted to get back to sleep, but felt that if his son wanted to ask him something it was his duty as a parent to hear it and dispense Learned Advice. 'Go on, then.'

Mike took a deep breath. 'I- I'm thinking of taking a work placement. The science lab – the one outside town - is taking on students to work part-time, and I thought it might be good experience, and give me some valuable skills and help teach me my place in the community and I-' He saw his dad's eyes start to glaze slightly and stopped. 'Yeah.'

Mr Wheeler sighed enormously. In his head he was already half-way back asleep. 'Why not, Michael. My father always told me that hard work... what was the phrase? Tempers the body and hardens the soul. No, wait, it was hardens the body and tempers the soul.' He

frowned. 'Hmm. Maybe not. Anyway,' he said, closing his eyes and leaning back. 'By all means try and get some work in before you have to support a family of your own. It's gruelling stuff, work. Best get used to it early.' He trailed off, the end of the sentence being lost in a mumble as he retreated back into the haze of unconsciousness, content that he had done his paternal duty.

Mike paused a moment, checking that his dad had fallen asleep again. 'Thanks, dad,' he muttered gleefully, and turning, bounded back to his room.

Ω

The lights were still on in the Byers household. Will Byers tended to be able to stay up later than other children his age, since Joyce Byers often had to work late and his older brother Jonathan was not the type to try and enforce a curfew. So long as he didn't look too tired the next morning, he could stay up until ten without much fuss, even on school nights. Tonight, he was deliberately pacing himself to stay up until his mother got home, when he could talk to her about the placement at Hawkins Lab. He was confident that if he presented it right, she would let him apply. His mom had never stopped him from doing extra-curricular science before, as the string of science fair medals hung in pride of place on his wall proved.

It was late when Joyce arrived back home. Jonathan had eaten with Will earlier and then retreated to his room. Will was sitting in the living room by the door, doodling in a spare school notebook. He drew the Party as their D&D characters as usual, but this time as he drew to stave off boredom he found himself staying on the one picture, rather than finishing it quickly and moving onto another one. He gave it colour, and slowly added to it so that it grew steadily more detailed. He paid special attention to the faces, trying to envisage each of his friends – their expressions, their thoughts, their mannerisms, trying to see past what they were saying to what they actually meant, like Jonathan told him he did with photography. Slowly, his friends took shape on the page. Will paused, pencil in hand, and looked over them.

Dustin; curly-haired, his teeth not quite in yet; infused with a love of science, always smiling, always enthusiastic. No matter what

happened. No matter how many times he got called 'toothless' at school and pushed over.

Lucas; his hair cropped; exasperated and practical. The one who took Dustin's mad schemes and turned them into something that actually happened, the one who always had exactly what they needed tucked away somewhere.

And Mike; dark hair and deep eyes, passionate and devoted. The one who bound the group together, and turned it from four nerds arguing with each other to a party that would move mountains to protect their own. He wasn't as good at survival skills as Lucas or as knowledgeable about science as Dustin, but he had something that seemed even more important to Will. Mike *cared*. Truly, genuinely. About random, pointless things, about stories and adventures, about people.

Will grinned at his friends, frozen in pencil lead, and started to draw himself next to them.

Excitement about the job at Hawkins Lab kept bubbling up in him, even as he worked. He added lightning coming from his magical staff, arcing around the page. *Energy*, thought Will. *What do you do with energy?* He was so deep in – lost in musings and in a small, quiet world of his own, propped up by crayons and built of graphite and lined paper, that he didn't even notice his mom's car pulling into the driveway until the front door opened.

Joyce Byers opened the door looking tired, though she smiled immediately when she saw Will.

'Hey sweetie, what are you doing still up?' she asked, pulling off her coat. Will shrugged, smiling back, and Joyce tutted. 'You've got school tomorrow and everything. Did you have a good day?'

'Alright, yeah.'

'Those boys give you any more trouble?'

'No, mom, really, I'm fine.'

Joyce looked hard at him, seeing if he was just trying to close the

subject. She sighed. 'Well, you know what I've said. Anything happens, anybody bothers you, I can put in a word with the principal and see it gets sorted.'

Will nodded uncomfortably. It was bad enough that his mom had found out about Troy and James – it would be worse if she tried to step in and tell the school. Joyce moved into the kitchen, bustling around cabinets and drawers.

'You ate supper already?' she asked over her shoulder. Will nodded.

'Jonathan cooked. There's some left over if you want it.'

Joyce grinned. Jonathan was not a very accomplished cook, but having food ready when you got home from a ten-hour shift made all the difference. 'You've got an angel for a brother, Will,' she said. She turned and swept him up into a hug. 'And I've got two for children.'

Will struggled in her grip, blushing. 'Put me down, mom, Jesus, I'm not three,' he muttered uncomfortably. Secretly, though, he was pleased. Joyce just grinned and went back to rooting around the kitchen, letting out a triumphant 'Aha!' when she found the covered bowl of spaghetti left from earlier. Will hesitated a moment, biting his lip.

'Mom?'

'Yes?' replied Joyce, now pouring the spaghetti into a small pot and beginning to heat it up on the stove.

'I've been thinking... I want to get a part-time job.'

Joyce paused for a moment when she heard that, her back to Will and a spoon still in her hand, then turned around suddenly. Will was startled to see that she looked close to tears.

'Oh no, sweetie, you mustn't think you need to do that,' she said, kneeling down and taking him gently by the shoulders. 'I understand you want to help, and I know it's hard not having all the nice things that Mike and Lucas and Dustin do, but you're really too young to be worrying-'

'No! No, mom, that's not it,' broke in Will fiercely, understanding in a flash. 'I don't care about that stuff, really I don't. I don't care if we don't have all that much money...' He looked straight at his mom, his eyes shining with conviction. 'That doesn't matter. Really.'

Joyce paused, her eyes still damp. 'What is it then?' she asked.

'It's... it's science. The lab, the one outside town was advertising a place at school. Proper scientific research – doing stuff no one's ever done before, and they're offering a place on it.'

Joyce looked curious despite herself. 'What kind of research?'

'It didn't say, just 'cutting-edge'.'

'And they want... you?'

'They want someone interested in science younger than thirteen. I don't know why. And mom, it's only part-time, it won't get in the way of school and I'll still be able to help around the house, I promise, but this is the sort of opportunity you don't expect to get and I really want to try for it.' Will broke off, panting. His mom looked searchingly at him.

'It's paid?'

Will hesitated. 'Yes, but that's not the important bit. I just want to do it. And- besides,' he added, remembering, 'besides, I agreed to split it with the others. Mike and Dustin are also applying, and if any of us get it we split the money four ways.'

Joyce stood up again, thinking. She was a proud woman and a proud mother, and she would not for anything have let her little boy feel he had to get a job at age twelve to help with the finances. That said, it did sound like a good opportunity, and really, it wasn't all that different to the commitment Will had put into science fairs in years past, which had often had a small cash reward for the winning team. So long as it didn't get in the way of the important things, and so long as the money was only an afterthought... She glanced down and saw Will's hopeful, pleading expression. *Mike and Dustin were going for it too...*

'Well, alright then,' she said, coming to a decision. Will's face split into a grin in an instant, and Joyce found herself smiling too, it was so infectious.

'Thank you!' he bubbled, hugging her fiercely around the stomach. Joyce ruffled his hair, and leaned back to look at him.

'So long as it doesn't get in the way,' she warned, pointing the spoon at him. Will shook his head earnestly.

'It won't! Promise!'

Joyce sighed hugely. 'Well, we'll see about that when it happens. In the meantime,' she added, 'you need to get to bed, my little rocket scientist. Yes, that's right, now. No fuss.'

Will, still bouncing off the walls but deciding not to push his luck, turned and scrambled towards his room. 'School day tomorrow!' called Joyce after him in reminder.

'Yes mom!' came the reply and the door to his room slammed shut. Joyce chuckled quietly to herself, before turning around and realising the spaghetti was boiling over. Cursing quietly, she pulled it off the stove dumped the pot in the sink, deciding the food was probably hot enough. She couldn't be irritated for long though. As she pulled a bowl out of the cupboard, ladling the reheated, overdone spaghetti into it and listening to the vaguely-defined thumps that were a standard part of a teenage boy's bedtime coming from the other room, she found herself smiling, and realised that she was much less tired than when she'd arrived home that evening.

Everyone loves the Byers, come on. Next chapter the party enter Hawkins Lab for the first time and find out which of them will be on Brenner's payroll, so stay strapped in and don't forget to follow!

3. Chapter 3

Standard Disclaimer: I do not own *Stranger Things*, the show upon which this is based. Not even in an alternate dimension.

'Name?'

'Dustin Henderson. Er, ma'am.'

'Age?'

'Twelve.'

'Are you a resident of Hawkins, Mister Henderson?'

'Yes! Ma'am.'

'If you'll follow me...'

Ω

'Name?'

'Will Byers. Well, William.'

'Age?'

'Twelve.'

'Resident of Hawkins?'

'Yes.'

'Through here, Mister Byers...'

Ω

'Name?'

'Michael Wheeler.'

'Age?'

'I'm twelve years old.'

'Resident of Hawkins, Mister Wheeler?'

'That's right.'

'Very well. This way...'

Ω

'There aren't very many of them.'

'That's to be expected. We pitched for low numbers and low publicity.'

'Still... do you seriously expect to find what you're looking for in that bunch of children?'

'Ms Frazier counted nine applicants. Seven boys and two girls. It ought to be a sufficient sample, Mr Heathcote.'

'It ought to be one of the girls, surely. If the plan is to sic them on 011, it ought to be a girl.'

'A girl would be preferable. However, neither of the two girls looks immensely promising from the preliminaries and we will chose the child based chiefly on temperament. Still, we shall see how they stand up after the full interview and exam.'

'I still don't understand why you want an exam on this, Brenner. The kid doesn't need to be a scientist, they just need to be nice and strongly resistant to weirdness.'

'They need to appear comfortable and at home here. They need to trust the staff, the scientists and the psychologists and myself. They cannot do that from a position of total obliviousness. Ah, Connie. News?'

'I've just put the last of the children through the interviews, Dr Brenner. She should be in the exam for another fifteen minutes or so, and then security will escort her out.'

'Good. Do be present to see her leave as well, will you? It might send the wrong message to have men with guns force her from the premises.'

'Of course, Doctor.'

'Good. Were any of them promising?'

'There were several who looked like possible candidates. The two girls appear, unfortunately, to be duds. One of them seemed to be mainly interested in a paying job and if the other wasn't applying on a dare, I'll eat my coat. Not that she'd admit to such, of course.'

'Disappointing. The others?'

'The main sticking point is your criteria for empathy, Doctor. Inherently nice and understanding are rare traits in any twelve year-old, and they aren't the most common combination with 'interested in science'.'

'What about the curly-haired kid, Henderson? He looked a bit like a teddy bear.'

'Too enthusiastic and not perceptive enough, Mr Heathcote. Applicant Eight looked particularly suitable, though. Engaging. Sympathetic. Scientific. I would put it between him and Applicant Two, myself.'

'Give me the full results later, Connie. And do some back-up checks – talk to their teachers, see if you can find anything. In the meantime, attend to the children and see they make it out safely. If you will excuse us...'

'Yes, Doctor. Mr Heathcote.'

Ω

Will, Dustin and Lucas were lurking in the woods by the entrance to Hawkins National Lab, waiting. Will and Dustin had been politely but forcibly removed from the facility after they had each finished their tests, and were now waiting with Lucas for the last member of their group, who was still in the lab.

'Jesus, how long is he going to take?' complained Dustin after several minutes of silence.

'We haven't been waiting that long,' retorted Will.

Lucas stretched. 'You haven't been waiting that long. You only just got out yourself. I've been here for an hour and a half now, waiting for all you to be done.'

Will sighed. 'Well, it can't be much longer.'

They fell back into silence for a minute or so.

'Jesus, how long-' began Dustin.

Ω

The gate to Hawkins Lab swung open with an abrasive metallic grinding, and Mike came out, walking his bike. He had barely gone a few feet when the party descended on him.

'There you are!' said Lucas in cheerful incredulity. 'What the hell kept you so long?'

'I don't think it was anything special,' said Mike dismissively, as they started to walk their bikes to the main road. 'I think they were just doing it alphabetically. I ran into Lucy Whitelock on the way out, she was still there.'

Will frowned. 'Didn't expect her to apply for this sort of thing.'

'Probably just Stacy Creeks putting her up to it,' shrugged Lucas. 'Like that time she tried to paint the Principal's car green.'

'Serves her right in the end,' said Mike. 'She looked pretty terrified.'

Will glanced sideways at the rest of the party. 'It was quite... a lot, in there. Soldiers and cameras everywhere. Triple-checked security.'

'I know,' said Dustin. 'It was *awesome*. Like, all we needed was to accidentally see a lab with green slime in it and it would have been pure textbook.'

'They are definitely up to something though,' added Lucas, glancing at the formidable shape of the lab behind them. 'I was watching the lab with binoculars while you were all inside. It's Fort Knox in there. All that security... something secret's going on in there for sure.'

Mike nodded. 'Yeah. And they tried really hard to keep us all apart so we didn't see the other kids applying. The lady I was with was really angry when we ran into Lucy Whitelock. They split the three of us up immediately and talked to us at different times, even though we arrived together.'

'What was on your guys' interviews?' asked Lucas eagerly. Dustin frowned.

'Mine was... kind of strange, really.'

'Same,' said Mike. 'Just a couple questions about who I was and where I lived and then she started asking me about school.'

'She kept staring at me,' said Dustin contemplatively.

'It was an interview,' bickered Mike absently. 'Of course she was looking at you.'

'Still!' replied Dustin defensively. 'It was weird. She asked me about my teeth. And then she made me sign not to talk about the interview or application to anyone.'

'Same!' said Will. He frowned, thinking. 'She asked me a lot about my family. I think she was trying to find some kind of psychological box to put me in.'

'Yeah, I got that too,' Mike agreed. 'I felt like whatever she was actually saying, she was just using it as an excuse to get me to talk so she could work out what I was like.'

'Better than Lucy Whitelock, I hope,' grinned Will. Dustin scoffed.

'An orc would be better than Lucy Whitelock. She's not a scientist at all.'

'Nor are you,' pointed out Lucas. Dustin puffed up his chest, nearly

dislodging his baseball cap.

'Being a scientist is a state of mind, not just a job,' he declared grandly. 'I have a natural curiosity and a sharp intellect that I bring to bear in search of knowledge about the world around me. That makes me a scientist.'

The rest of the party burst into chuckles. 'I'm sure that's what you told your interviewer when she asked you,' said Will.

'Test for charisma to see if the interviewer believes you,' said Mike, as they reached the main road and swung up onto their bikes. '-2 modifier to your ability score if you're still wearing the Baseball Cap of Many Colours.'

'Hey!' cried Dustin, annoyed. He started to advance on Mike, but the other boy pushed off from the curb and shot down the road, pedalling furiously.

'Catch me if you can!' he shouted over his shoulder after him. 'Last one back gets captured by the Ringwraiths!'

'Shit,' muttered Dustin, and swung back onto his bike, realising even as he did so he was too late to catch Mike. 'Come back here!' he bellowed at the rapidly retreating back of his friend. 'Nazgûl eat you, you piece of shit! Come back here! *Ash nazg durbatulûk! Ash nazg-*'

He started pedalling anyway, hot in pursuit. Will and Lucas watched him sail haphazardly after the distancing Mike, holding his baseball cap on with one hand and shouting abuse at the top of his voice. Will glanced sidelong at Lucas. Casually, Lucas made a small move towards his bike. Immediately Will scrambled onto his and the two of them raced forwards, desperately trying to outpace the other. A faint cloud of dust rose into the air in the wake of their passing, and then slowly settled again. The tall, broad grey outline of Hawkins Lab was silent.

Ω

The doorbell rang. Scott Clarke, science teacher at Hawkins Middle School, opened it to find a middle-aged woman with slightly

unrealistically blond curls waiting on his doorstep.

'Oh,' he stuttered slightly, surprised. 'Excuse me. What can I do for you?'

She smiled broadly and openly at him. 'Mr... Clarke, is it? From Hawkins Middle?'

He raised an eyebrow slightly. 'The very same. My fame is evidently spreading.'

The woman chuckled warmly and extended her hand to shake. 'I'm Leanne Hart. I have a few questions about some of your students. May I come in?'

'Oh! Yes, of course. Anything I can do.' He stepped aside and ushered her into his living room, where she glanced around for a moment before seating herself in one of the chairs. Mr Clarke sat opposite her on the sofa, his back to the window.

Leanne Hart hesitated for a moment, seemingly gathering herself, then leaned forwards.

'Mr Clarke. I am an administrator with Hawkins National Laboratory, the one outside town. You know it?'

Mr Clarke nodded. 'By sight only. I can't say I've ever gone in.'

The woman nodded. 'Well, one of my duties is coordinating outreach. Trying to give a bit back on the local level, you know. Make it less just a two-way line between us and the Department of Energy. What we're working on at the moment is a part-time internship for a few months for a local child of about twelve or so. Try and give some lucky kid with an interest in science a bit of a kick-start on the road to a career. Maybe start the training of the next generation of Department of Energy workers, who knows?' She chuckled, and Mr Clarke joined in.

'That sounds like a laudable goal,' replied Mr Clarke. 'Have you got a child yet?'

'Well,' said Hart, eyes glinting, 'In strictest confidence – I can talk to

you in confidence can't I? Good – In strictest confidence, we were wondering if we could have a bit of a talk about one of your students.'

'Oh!' said Mr Clarke in sudden realisation. Looking back on it, he shouldn't really be surprised. He taught most all of the children in the area of that age, bar a handful of home-schooled ones. It wasn't surprising he probably knew the one Leanne was talking about.

'We have a child in mind,' she continued. 'The cream of the crop who applied, you could say. But we thought we'd check with their science teacher first, just to be sure.'

'Of course,' said Mr Clarke slowly, 'you realise that I'm not allowed to discuss my students with outside adults, even informally or to government workers. It would be a breach of student confidentiality and professional ethics.'

'Of course!' replied Hart. 'Oh no, don't worry, we're not asking you to break the teacher's code or anything! No, we have explicit permission from all applicants to access their teachers and records. Signed and sealed and all the legal whatnot. Here.'

She pulled a slip of paper from her handbag and presented it to Mr Clarke, who appraised with a teacher's eye for detecting forged sick notes and permission slips. He sighed. 'Well, this looks in order. Sorry,' he added apologetically, 'But better safe than sore, I suppose.'

Leanne Hart smiled broadly at him again. 'Of course. I couldn't agree more. Now, this student – from what we could tell – seems perfect for the job. Interested, committed, knowledgeable. He had a sort of... depth to him – not quite charisma, but just you could tell he was passionate about the work from looking at him as he talked about it. I wonder if-'

'Hang on,' interrupted Mr Clarke, holding up a finger and smiling. 'I would be willing to bet that I know which student you mean. You,' he said, with the air of a conjurer lifting the curtain on his trick, 'are talking about Mike Wheeler.'

Leanne burst out laughing. 'They say that good teachers know their

students better than their own children. I guess it must be true.' She collected herself as Mr Clarke blushed a little. 'But yes, you're absolutely right. Michael Wheeler is the child in question. I wonder, as his teacher, if there's anything you would add..?'

Mr Clarke thought for a moment. 'Well, off-hand I cannot think of a student more suitable for a job like this. Mike is devoted to science and technology – he's got a group of friends who all hang out in the Audiovisual Room during breaks, fiddling with the radios. He's everything you said and more – interested and interesting and a good lad to boot. He's had a few problems with bullies during his time here, so I think something like this would be just what he needs to give his self-esteem a little boost. No,' he finished, looking straight at Leanne Hart, 'I will happily give Mike the strongest reference I can for you.'

Leanne beamed. 'Thank you very much. Well, in that case, I will take up no more of your weekend.'

Mr Clarke showed her to the door, hesitating on the threshold. 'By all means, please tell me how he gets on. I'd be very interested to hear.'

Leanne Hart turned back. 'Of course. I'd be very glad to.' Smiling a little, Mr Clarke closed the door and Leanne Hart turned away again, unlocking her car and getting in. She turned on the radio and waited until the static died down.

'Connie Frasier reporting in,' she said. 'Recon One is complete, repeat Recon One is a success. We may proceed.'

On the other end of the radio, Doctor Brenner leaned back at his desk.

'Excellent. Send out the letter when you arrive back here.' He turned off the radio and smiled, before standing suddenly and leaving the room.

Ω

'Good afternoon, my dear. Oh, are you still angry with me? Don't be angry. I'm bringing you a new friend soon. That's right, Papa cares

about you so much he's bringing in someone specially to be your friend. You'll get to meet him soon. His name is Michael Wheeler. Say it – Michael. Come on, don't be stubborn...'

The hint of a whisper.

'...Michael.'

Thank you to all my readers for the support this has received so far, especially the ones who left a comment. Next chapter is the one you've all been waiting for: Mike gets indoctrinated to the lab and is sent to meet the inhabitant of Block 011, so make sure to stick around!

4. Chapter 4

Standard Disclaimer: I do not own *Stranger Things*, the show upon which this is based. And no, I'm not bitter about it at all. Not bitter. At. All.

'Are we ready for the extraction?'

'The van's on standby, Dr Brenner.'

'Excellent. Any information on the family?'

'Family of five: the boy, two sisters, mother and father. One sister only five, the other older by a few years – high school senior. Father works a management job; voted straight Republican in the last five elections – Reagan, Nixon and Goldwater. Wife followed suit – uninterested in politics, but a model of the community. Very middle-class. No known foreign sympathies. Strong patriotic element.'

'Always a useful thing to tap into. Thank you, Connie.'

'Do you want me to take the extraction, sir?'

'I prefer to handle this personally. Be available for our arrival, though.'

'Yes, Dr Brenner.'

'Let's go collect our new employee, shall we?'

Ω

The Wheeler Household was sitting down to dinner when the doorbell rang. Karen Wheeler looked up from the dish of roast potatoes she had been carefully putting on the table and sighed.

'Now who can that be, I wonder?' she asked in mild exasperation, glancing around the table. Ted Wheeler shrugged at her, and Mike and Nancy both looked as if they could hardly care less, lost in their own worlds of teenage importance. Seeing no support from her family, Karen put the dish of potatoes down rather harder than she

had been intending and hurried to the hallway. The doorbell rang a second time. As the three Wheelers heard the door *click* open, Mr Wheeler started ladling potatoes onto his plate.

Mrs Wheeler pulled the door open, intending to be brisk but polite and get back to the table before the potatoes cooled or Ted got into the pork chops. On her doorstep was a tall man in a sombre suit and long coat, with a head of thick silver-white hair. He smiled.

'Ah. Mrs Wheeler, I presume? May I come in?'

Mrs Wheeler blinked briefly, as she tried to think of a polite way of asking who the hell this man was and why he was appearing at her door at six in the evening.

'I- I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting visitors,' she managed after a moment. The man nodded graciously.

'Of course. How inconsiderate of me. My name is Martin Brenner, of the Department of Energy, and it is imperative that I speak to your son. Might I trouble you for a few moments?'

Weakly, more confused than annoyed, Mrs Wheeler nodded, standing aside. Brenner swept into her house, the tails of his coat trailing behind him. He strode without hesitation into the dining room, before pausing on the threshold.

'Pardon me, I did not intend to interrupt your meal,' he said, nodding to Ted Wheeler. 'Might I borrow young Michael for a moment?'

Mr Wheeler stared at him, speechless. So did Nancy and Mike.

'M-me?' burst out Mike, and Brenner turned to him.

'Michael Wheeler,' he said with a short nod. 'It is a pleasure to meet you properly.'

Karen Wheeler, still struggling to find a polite way of demanding an explanation to this sudden and unexpected home invasion, appeared at Brenner's elbow.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'Why does the Department of Energy

want to talk to Mike?'

Brenner glanced down at her for a long moment. 'He hasn't told you,' he said. It was not a question.

Mrs Wheeler frowned. 'Told me what?' she asked. She turned sharply. 'Michael?'

Mike froze, caught between a growing sense of glee at the strange visitor and what he must mean and guilt about his parents catching him in the act. He shuffled uncomfortably, digging his heel into the carpet. Brenner filled in the silence.

'I am the director at the Hawkins National Laboratory, outside town,' he explained. 'We recently advertised an internship that Master Wheeler was kind enough to apply for. I come to bring the good news.'

'Good news?' asked Mike in an excited burst. He couldn't help himself.

'Mike?' asked Karen, raising one eyebrow, and Mike looked down, abashed.

'I asked dad,' mumbled Mike almost inaudibly, and was relieved when his mother's stare left him to rest on her husband.

'I- hmm, I might have,' said Ted vaguely, frowning as he tried to replay all his conversations with his son for the last few days. He gave up. 'Well, if Michael says I gave him permission, I'm sure I gave him permission. Yes, I'm certain of it.' He turned to Brenner, trying to muster an authoritative air. 'He got the job, you say?'

Brenner nodded curtly. 'Should he accept it. That is why I am here.' He reached into an inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a small file, perusing it for a moment before selecting a paper and spreading it on the dining table, next to the soup. 'This is a full contract. I will require Master Wheeler's signature on it. And, since he is under eighteen, I will require his parents' signatures too. Preferably both of them.'

'But,' protested Mrs Wheeler uncertainly, 'what is this job you say he's

got? What will he be doing? He can't work full time – he still has school, and I refuse to let him drop out, even for a work placement.'

There was a slight pause. Brenner shut the file with a soft *snap*. 'Mrs Wheeler. Mr Wheeler,' he added, extending the comment to Ted. 'Let me tell the details, insomuch as I am able and permitted.'

'Permitted?' asked Mrs Wheeler, but Brenner continued without replying.

'This post is a part-time, paid position at Hawkins National Laboratory, one of the foremost experimental research labs in the country. We are in need of the services of someone like Michael. Someone... exactly like Michael.'

'Paid, you say?' grunted Ted. Brenner passed him a sheaf of paper.

'The details are in there.'

'In need of Michael!' pressed Karen. 'But why? What can he do that's so valuable?'

'This is very good salary,' put in Ted, looking up from his paper. 'For a twelve-year old with no experience or skills working part-time.'

Brenner held up his hands, stemming the flow of questions. He glanced across at Mike, who was watching in breathless excitement, too nervous of his chances to speak up.

'Please,' said Brenner firmly, appealing to the couple. 'Understand that I would like to explain everything to you. Truly. But there are codes and practices binding me, and I can only say a little.'

Mr Wheeler looked up as closely as he could get to doing anything sharply. 'Secret, you mean?'

Brenner nodded. 'I am an employee of the Department of Energy, and so of the government. I cannot tell much more, but suffice to say that should he accept our position young Michael will also be treated as such. An adult in the service of his country. At Hawkins we perform research of a confidential nature vital to the continuation of our nation and its place in the modern world. We pay well because we

require a very specific combination of skills and temperaments. Believe me when I say that Michael is crucial in ways he does not yet understand to the success of an experiment that would guarantee our nation primacy over those who would destroy us or bring us down. From the moment he sets foot on the premises, your son is as much a hero of his country as a politician or member of the armed forces.'

There was a ringing silence. Mike looked around in trepidation. Mr and Mrs Wheeler were staring at Brenner. Nancy was looking like someone had just smacked her around the face. Her mouth was slightly open. To Mike's complete surprise, his dad slowly stood up from the table, his napkin falling to the floor forgotten, and stood smartly before Brenner.

'Sir,' he said ponderously, 'I understand that you are not able to tell us the full details. But if Michael is as necessary as you say – necessary to the country – I will by no means prevent him from fulfilling it.' He reached for the contract, thick fingers scrabbling for a pen. Leaning across awkwardly, he signed his name at the bottom. 'We must all do our duty, sir,' he said to Brenner, who was smiling.

'And I thank you for your service too, Mr Wheeler.'

Ted reached across the table and seized Mike by the shoulders, steering him firmly around to where Brenner stood.

'You applied for this job, I assume you want it,' he said gruffly to Mike, who nodded. He could barely contain his excitement. 'Good,' pronounced Ted, handing Mike the pen and standing aside as he scribbled something illegible across the line of black dots.

Brenner's smile broadened. 'That leaves only one. Mrs Wheeler?'

Karen Wheeler still looked uncertain, but she drew herself up. 'I'll be the last one to shirk from duty, but...' she hesitated. 'Will it be safe?'

'What?' asked Brenner.

'Karen-' began Ted, but Mrs Wheeler rode over him.

'You talk of these – experiments, that you want Mike to work on. Secret things, things you can't even talk about. Will my son be safe

there? Can you guarantee that to me?'

Dr Brenner smiled at Karen, a smile that was open and held no guile. 'Of course I can,' he said reassuringly. 'No harm will come to Michael, you have my word on that. I would give the same assurance for any of my staff.'

Nodding hesitantly, Karen reached for the paper, and Mike had to resist the urge to punch the air. She signed her name carefully and neatly under Ted's and Mike rushed across, wrapping his arms around her and nearly knocking her over with the force of his passing.

'Thanks, mom,' he said, a little muffled. She patted his head a little bemusedly.

'Alright Michael.'

Dr Brenner, who had been carefully putting all the papers back into the file and secreting it in his coat, looked up.

'Very well, Michael. Get your coat.'

'W-what?' asked Karen, as another sleeper fell in front of her mental train. 'You mean... now?'

'Yes, sir!' replied Mike eagerly, all but running into the hall.

'I'm afraid so,' said Brenner consolingly. 'Now that we have your agreement, the work must continue immediately. He will be returned before midnight.'

'Even so, we were about to have supper. Can't it wait 'til the morning?' pleaded Mrs Wheeler, looking very lost.

'I am afraid not, Mrs Wheeler. The enemies of this nation are not waiting. The Soviets – the Chinese – they are not waiting. We cannot afford to either. We must be equally vigilant, equally watchful, if we are to remain ahead. We cannot abandon liberty and freedom to sloth.'

Brenner turned to go, then paused. 'I should mention that included in that contract you signed was a non-disclosure agreement. You

cannot, any of you, mention even such scant details as I have been able to give you here. That Michael is working an internship in Hawkins Lab is not and should not be a secret. But everything else you have heard here pertaining to the nature of his work must not be repeated to anyone, no matter how close or trustworthy. Not to extended family or relatives, not to friends of the family or colleagues, not even to close friends of Michael. The security of our mission rests on you.'

'Have no fear on that count,' replied Ted. 'We're all patriots here.'

Mike reappeared, his coat hastily zipped up. Dr Brenner put an arm around his shoulders and turned towards the door, nodding to Mike's parents. As he passed, Ted Wheeler stood as close to attention as he could and snapped off a salute. Brenner did not hesitate, and matched it with his free hand, saluting in return.

'Sir,' said Mr Wheeler.

The family watched in varying degrees of shock as Brenner escorted Mike into the hall and out of the door. A white van pulled up on the curb as they left and Brenner ushered Mike into it, closing the doors behind them.

There was a slight pause, then Karen shivered and shut the front door. Ted broke off his salute and sat heavily down at the table again, picking up his fork. Ms Wheeler bustled back into the dining room, taking Mike's empty plate and cutlery and setting them by the sink.

Nancy stared at her parents as they unthinkingly reasserted normality. 'Are we not going to talk about this?' she burst out after a moment of silence.

'About what, dear?' asked Karen from the kitchen.

'About what just happened! Men in black just descended on us and abducted Mike for some kind of experiment! They were obviously up to something shady!' Nancy looked around. 'Are you blind?!'

'Don't shout now, dear,' reproved Karen gently. Nancy stared at her

incredulously.

'*That's* all you can say? Dad, you didn't even remember Mike applying!'

Ted laid down his fork with a deliberate motion. 'Nancy,' he said, 'This is the Government. They're on our side. Maybe if you'd got that straight years ago you'd have something more to show than racking up a college bill. Now we are not allowed to speak of Mike's... employment, so that is what I expect to happen. And a little respect wouldn't go amiss either, young lady.'

Nancy gaped at him. He picked up the fork again. 'Karen, these potatoes are cold,' he called into the kitchen. Nancy didn't wait for the answer.

'I'm not very hungry,' she said coldly, dropping her napkin angrily on the table and rising from her chair. Ted watched her go absently, hearing her storm up the stairs and slam the door to her room. Abandoning the potatoes, he took up his spoon and reached for the soup instead.

Ω

Mike sat in the back of the windowless white van, the Hawkins Laboratory logo emblazoned on the side. He felt the rumbling of motion and tried to restrain himself from jumping up and down or asking questions at a hundred miles an hour, neither of which, he thought, would be a very professional attitude to his first job. His *first job*. He got the place, and he would be working on something so secret he couldn't even talk to his family about it, and *did you see the look on Nancy's face?* He grinned. He didn't mean to, it just kept breaking out. He couldn't wait to tell the rest of the party. Will would be excited and congratulate him, Lucas would treat it like a team victory, and Dustin would be jealous for about five minutes before forgetting he was supposed to be angry as he tried to guess what Mike was working on.

Opposite Mike sat the man with white hair. He smiled indulgently at Mike's ecstatic expression, before leaning forward and breaking him out of his train of thought.

'My name is Doctor Brenner, Michael,' he said over the rattling of the van's progress. 'I am the director at Hawkins Lab, and I will be the one responsible for both your wellbeing and the work you will undertake. Do you understand?'

Mike nodded, his heart in his mouth. 'Sir,' he asked eagerly, 'What work will I be doing?'

Brenner smiled again. 'I will explain when we get to the Lab.' He checked his watch. 'Which should be any moment.'

The van ground to a halt and a man in a security uniform opened the back of the van, letting the dusky light spill in. Mike hurried out, trying not to stumble over the step.

He was in Hawkins Lab – he recognised the shape of the large grey building in front of him. The parking lot the van was in looked more or less unremarkable, but tall concrete walls closed off the outside in every direction and Mike could barely see the tops of the forest beyond them. Brenner stepped out of the van, straightened his long coat, and knelt down to Mike's level.

'This,' he said, producing a small rectangle of plastic in a clear sleeve, 'Is your security keycard. It will get you into or out of the building. Now, you should never actually need to use it – you will be escorted into the lab from the parking lot – but safety regulations mean that we cannot have an employee in the building who does not have the clearance to get out again in an emergency – a fire, for instance.'

Mike took the keycard carefully. Brenner hung it from a small string around the boy's neck and Mike felt the hard plastic dangling next to his chest. It had his name and a small picture on one side, and a long series of lines like a barcode on the other.

'The keycard, as you've noticed, is also your identifier,' continued Brenner. 'That shows you have the right to be in the lab, just in case security gets... overzealous. Do not lose this, Michael. Under any circumstances.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Mike quietly, overwhelmed, and Brenner gave a small smile.

'No need for all the 'sir's. I am a scientist and a doctor. That will suffice.'

Mike grinned back at him. 'Yes, Doctor.'

'Perfect. Now, follow me. There is much to do.'

Brenner stood and strode off towards the main building, Mike hurrying in his wake. As they reached the main doors, Brenner nodded to the pair of security guards and the doors hummed open. Michael held his breath as he saw his first glimpse of the inside of Hawkins Lab. It was white – walls, ceiling, furniture and desks. Everything was white or grey. A couple of employees were working in the main reception, but they looked more like administrative staff than scientists. They weren't even wearing lab coats, noted Mike with disappointment. They looked up when the doors opened, but Brenner walked straight past them.

'Tell Ms Frazier I've returned from the pickup,' he said in passing to a young lady wearing a headset that reminded Mike of Dustin's, and she nodded smartly.

'Yes, Dr Brenner.'

Brenner gestured Mike to follow him, and together they ventured into the depths of the lab.

They walked in silence, Mike half a pace behind Brenner. Mike was soon completely lost. He had tried to count turns, but got quickly confused by the perpetual identical white hallways. Three times they were stopped by a security door, but Brenner's card opened them all without pause. Glancing around, Mike couldn't see any identifications or maps on the walls except large numbers printed occasionally in black. He was sure they showed which part of the building he was in, but he couldn't decipher them to work it out. Finally, Brenner stopped in a room that looked very similar to all the others they had passed through – nearly blank and the same ubiquitous white. A sealed door dominated the far side of the wall. Brenner opened his mouth to say something, but broke off when with a clatter of footsteps the sealed door suddenly opened to reveal a woman, two white-coated scientists in her wake.

'Connie,' Brenner said curtly. 'I said to meet us on arrival.'

'We've been having problems in Block 011,' she said by way of greeting. 'I've been trying to re-exert control but we really need you, Doctor.'

In an instant Brenner's annoyance vanished. 'What level of disturbance?' he demanded, frowning.

'Only three,' replied the woman – Connie? – and Brenner muttered something angrily to himself. Running a hand through his hair, he strode past the door the three adults had come from, Connie and the scientists following him. Pausing, he turned back and glanced at Mike.

'Hanson,' he said to one of the scientists, 'Give Wheeler the initiation procedure.'

And then he was gone, the door sliding closed with a faint hiss behind him.

Mike looked at the scientist who had been left. He was a man, bald, and about forty. He looked at Mike and gave an enormous sigh.

'Michael Wheeler?'

'Yes- uh, sir.'

The man gave an approximation of a smile. He looked tired and hassled. 'I'm Dr Hanson, the Lab Eight supervisor. And since Lab Eight is where you'll be working to begin with, I'll be telling you all the stuff you need to know. You understand the more important the thing you're working on is, the more rules there are to follow?'

Mike nodded. Hanson continued. 'Then it'll come as no surprise to you that here at Hawkins there is a quite herculean amount of red tape. You know what herculean means?' Mike nodded again.

'Better follow me then.'

As Dr Hanson led Mike down yet another series of indistinguishable corridors, Mike hesitated.

'Sir – what's in Block 011?'

Hanson glanced back at Mike. 'That's way beyond you, kid. What's your security clearance level? It's on your card.'

Mike checked. 'Three.'

'Right. So work hard and don't ask any questions like that for about, ooh, ten, fifteen years? Then you'll get to know what's in Block 011.'

Mike bit his tongue, embarrassed and a little angry.

'I'm not a kid. You don't have to talk to me like one,' he said. Hanson actually laughed.

'You're what, ten?'

'Twelve.'

'Right. You're a kid, and I'm your supervisor. Understand?'

Mike said nothing, and followed mulishly. Finally Dr Hanson stopped, and Mike almost forgot his anger. They were in, for the first time, something that actually looked like a science lab. Computer terminals lined one wall, complex arrangements of test tubes lined the other. In the middle were several large tables. Mike went to step forward, and Hanson stopped him.

'Not yet, kid. Gotta read you the riot act first.' He cleared his throat. 'While in the complex you will wear regulation clothing at all times. The cloakroom and changing rooms are there' (he gestured to one side) 'for when you arrive. For your personal safety and the security of the lab no personal possessions are permitted beyond that threshold' (he pointed again, this time at a large yellow line on the floor just past the changing rooms). 'Transgression of this rule is a federally punishable offence. Do you understand?'

'Yes sir,' replied Mike hurriedly.

'From now on you will be treated as an adult with respect to your work – an adult employed by Hawkins Lab and by the Department of Energy. You will be expected to carry out your work punctually and

efficiently. Should you be in doubt at any time about what your instructions are or how to fulfil them, you should talk to myself, Mrs Pastors the head of personnel, or Dr Brenner. Do you understand?'

Mike nodded.

'Welcome to Hawkins Lab, Master Wheeler. Now, pass me that petri dish.'

Ω

It soon became clear to Mike that Dr Hanson didn't really need his assistance. While the adult kept finding things for Mike to do around the lab, as the minutes passed by into an hour and Hanson became ever more invested in his research, it was obvious that Mike was just there as an accessory. He handled equipment, wrote results that Hanson dictated, and shifted papers. Dr Hanson made no attempt to explain his work, but Mike watched keenly as equations chattered across computer screens and Hanson did mysterious things with pipettes and test tubes.

'Sir?' he had ventured at one point, 'What are you doing?'

Dr Hanson had waited a moment before replying. 'Working,' he had said, and fallen silent again.

Mike watched the door carefully, but Brenner did not return. Whatever was happening in Block 011 was clearly taking time to deal with. As Mike keyed in the last result into a terminal near the door, he made an executive decision. Dr Hanson was enthralled with his project. He was examining something closely under a microscope and making notes with his free hand. He hadn't stirred for ten minutes and didn't look likely to look up any time soon. And Mike would never find out exactly what the lab was doing that was so secret if he stayed here doing paperwork.

Glancing nervously at Hanson one last time, Mike clenched his hand around the keycard hanging from his neck and slipped quietly out of the door, heading back down the corridor they had come from. His heart was pounding. He had made a more determined effort to memorise the way he had come this time, and he was reasonably

certain he could get back to the room where Brenner had left him. Beyond that... he was in uncharted territory. He forced himself not to look behind him guiltily every few steps, trying to walk with confidence and not rush. Mike took a deep, steadying breath. Then another.

He was in the room again now – the entrance to the lab one way, Hanson and Lab Eight another. And in front of him, a sealed pair of double doors. Above them, in faded red block lettering, was the phrase 'East Wing, Blocks 001-011'.

Heart in his mouth, Mike checked he was alone, then hurried up to the door and slid his keycard into the lock. There was a moment's breathless pause, then a small light flickered green and the door slid open with a faint hiss.

Facing Mike was a short, bare corridor, identical to the ones throughout the rest of the facility. At the end of it was an elevator. As Mike slipped inside the elevator, the grey steel doors shut behind him. A row of buttons studded the wall next to the door, one through eleven. Mike began to key in eleven, when in a sudden rush of panic he realised he should probably avoid Brenner, in case he was punished for wandering out-of-bounds. They must have intended him to come here, or his card wouldn't have unlocked it, but something told Mike he wasn't supposed to see this area yet. Hesitating, he pressed the button for Block 001 instead, and listened to the elevator creak and whistle as it rose suddenly. Barely a moment later, it stopped, and the doors opened again.

Mike stepped out, and into Block 001.

The first thing he noticed was the bright striped hazard tape cordoning off the corridor. A sign attached to the middle of it read:

'Block 001 is decommissioned and closed to any and all access in all perpetuity until further instruction. Please turn around and return to your designated destination.'

Mike swallowed, thinking for a moment. There couldn't be anything dangerous, he thought. Any radiation or chemicals or surviving hazards wouldn't be stopped by an elevator and a few strips of hazard

tape. There must be another reason that Block 001 was so completely out of bounds.

He grinned to himself, and carefully slipped under the tape barrier.

Ω

The first thing Mike noticed was the dust. While every other part of Hawkins Lab he'd seen had been spotlessly clean, a thick layer of dust coated everything in Block 001 – floors, tables, even doors. He passed through several rooms that looked very similar to those in the rest of the lab, not noticing anything different or exciting. If the dust on the floor was to be believed, no one had been in Block 001 for a very long time.

Mike reached a break in the monotonously identical rooms and paused. The corridor he was on had a large glass window on one side, looking into an adjacent room. Mike stood on his tiptoes, straining to peer in. Inside the adjacent room was a large operating chair surrounded by various pieces of disused apparatus and equipment. Steel glinted from under inches of dust and cobwebs. Looking at the sleeping operating room, Mike had a sudden feeling of horror and recoiled from the window, almost falling over backwards. He couldn't say why, but something about that chair and the dusty tools filled him with a horrible cocktail of revulsion and fear. Jerking himself away, he almost ran further down the corridor. When he saw a door set into the wall on his right, he pulled it open and ran inside unthinkingly, slamming the door unthinkingly.

Turning and taking deep breaths, forcing down his moment of irrational panic, Mike looked around the new room. It was pretty bare itself. A square table sat in the centre, with two chairs on opposite sides of it. Spotlights hung from the ceiling, angled down at the chairs. Mike felt a twisting sensation in his stomach as he recognised the innocuous-looking room from shows he'd seen. It was an interrogation room.

Mike closed the door softly behind him and walked further into Block 001. At this stage, he couldn't have gone back if he tried. His curiosity was pulling him forward like a physical force, leaving him no option to turn around. He passed several more nearly-blank rooms

before reaching the last and most horrific secret of Block 001. A final door ended the corridor in front of him and Mike reached a hand forward, tentatively pushing it. Unlike the other rooms along the corridor, this needed his card to open it. Leaving the door ajar, he forged ahead. Inside, he found a room that more resembled a cell than anything else. It had a small table with a single chair, a threadbare cloth acting as a rug, and a dusty, mouldering bed made up of grey sheets and steel posts. Everything was very worn.

Somebody had lived here, though Mike, as he turned slowly in a circle, taking in the entire room and its meagre contents. Sat at this table, walked this floor, slept on this bed. This bed, he realised slowly, which was short. Very short. Too short for an adult to sleep in.

Something entered Mike's brain at high speeds and shot around like a bullet, bouncing off the walls of his skull.

Tests. Interrogations. Experiments. *Children.*

There was a creak behind him and Mike realised the door was slowly swinging closed. He lunged forwards and seized it, holding it open even as he realised in some fevered part of his brain that the inside of the door was completely blank and smooth – not lock, keyhole or handle. Nothing to open it from the inside.

Prisoners, screamed something in his mind, and then Mike was running, heaving the door to behind him, pounding down the corridor past the interrogation rooms and operating theatres and labs, driving up great clouds of cloying dust in his wake that coated his lab coat and made him cough. Mike ran unthinkingly until he was finally in sight of the elevator again, diving under the warning tape, hauling the heavy doors open and pummelling the down button until the elevator jolted into motion. Mike didn't relax until he was at the door of Lab Eight again, lurking outside and trying to calm his breathing while Doctor Hansen obliviously peered through his microscope, having apparently noticed nothing in the time Mike was gone.

'Sir,' said Mike, slipping back through the door once he had stopped panting, 'Is there anything I can help with?'

The white van dropped Mike off at the doorstep of his house at quarter past eleven. Mike swung down from the back and turned to the official who had taken him home.

'When will I get to come again?' he asked.

'Your next scheduled session is Wednesday, at four. However, as part of your contract, the Lab retains the right to call you at any time and require you to be present and ready.'

Mike nodded, hurried into his house, closing the door behind him. He was practically humming with excitement. While he hadn't seen Brenner again and had spent the rest of his time with Dr Hanson in Lab Eight, he was still ecstatic. So far he had been on administrative tasks, but Hanson had hinted that that might change once he proved he was able to handle the work and so Mike had thrown himself into every task with an unquenchable enthusiasm, from spreadsheets to recording temperatures. Once he had left the ghost block, he had calmed down considerably, away from the atmosphere of fear and neglect that floated in the air there like dust. He had thought a lot about what he had seen in Block 001. The first thing he had decided was that he needed to tell his friends. The second was that he needed to find out more as soon as he could.

'Michael!'

His mom had come in from the living room and seen him hanging his coat up.

'How are you? How did it go?'

'Good. Good.' He managed. She frowned at him in concern.

'Tired? And you must be starving.'

'A little, mom.'

As Mike allowed Karen to usher him into the kitchen, he grinned again instinctively.

The party was going to have a field day with this.

Ω

'Mister Wheeler, please wake up.'

'S- Sorry, Mr Kingham,' said Mike, stifling a yawn and trying to concentrate on English class. From the desk next to him, Lucas leaned over.

'What is it, man?' he whispered. 'You've been nodding off since first period.'

Mike waved him away. 'Tell you at lunch.' He tried to swallow another massive yawn, and looked down to find Steinbeck swimming on the page. He blinked hard, twice. Now the words just seemed out of focus. Mike was a second away from giving it up as a bad job when he was saved by the bell signifying the end of the lesson.

Mr Kingham's final words were lost in the collective roar as the class surged out of the room. The party gathered around Mike.

'The AV room,' yelled Dustin over the din. 'Come on!'

They fought their way through the hordes of students crowding the halls. As they reached the door to the AV room, Lucas, Mike and Dustin formed a barrier around the door, sheltering Will from the press as he pulled the key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. The four practically fell in, slamming the door shut against the rest of the school and collapsing in the relative quiet.

'I got the key off Mr Clarke this morning,' said Will. 'Now, Mike. What's up?'

Mike glanced around. Supposing there was nowhere more inconspicuous to tell his friends, he bit the bullet and began. He leaned in towards the others and spoke in a low voice.

'Last night, a man arrived on my doorstep from Hawkins Lab.'

'No way,' said Dustin. 'You are shitting me.'

'Give me a break,' agreed Lucas dismissively.

'It's true!' protested Mike. 'Swear it! Look!' He fished around in his bag, and pulled out a small plastic keycard in a clear sleeve. Looking immensely smug, he passed it to Lucas. 'Read it and weep.'

Lucas squinted at it for a moment, then looked up at Mike. 'No way,' he said incredulously. 'No way.'

'What? What?' demanded Dustin, craning his neck and trying to read the card over Lucas' shoulder. He grabbed for it and in the ensuing tussle managed to seize it from Lucas.

'Michael Wheeler,' he read. 'Hawkins National Laboratory, Department of Energy, security grade three.' Anything else he might have said was lost in the tumult as Will let out a whoop of pride and Mike cried 'See!'

'Yes!' said Will, punching the air. 'You got it!'

'Were there aliens?' asked Dustin eagerly. 'Genetic mutants? Superweapons?'

'Not that I saw,' admitted Mike. 'Just basic lab stuff. But something is definitely going on there guys. It's spooky.'

'What kind of lab needs security clearance on its employees?' asked Lucas. Mike nodded.

'Exactly. And that isn't the weirdest bit. There was security everywhere. Guys with guns and all these sealed doors. And they made me sign all these non-disclosure agreements, saying I wouldn't tell anyone anything that happened in there.'

'And a fine job you're doing following them,' laughed Lucas.

'Yeah, but listen,' pressed Mike. 'I managed to do a bit of exploring when my supervisor wasn't looking.'

'That's more like it,' said Dustin, grinning from ear to ear.

'What did you find?' asked Will.

'There was this set of floors, all labelled. Ward One, Ward Two and so on. A huge area, all the way up to Ward Ten. I got into Ward One. Completely empty. They had testing rooms of some kind, and places that looked like interrogation centres. And that wasn't the worst bit.'

Mike swallowed. Even the next day, something about those dusty rooms unsettled him. 'Someone had been living there. On the floor, in the ward itself, there was a room. With a bed, and a table and stuff. Basic stuff. Clearly used. All just forgotten and rotting away in the dark. They had made a lab with someone living inside it. And the door to that room – it didn't open from the inside.'

'Oh my god,' said Dustin quietly. 'Oh my god.'

Mike glanced around. The rest of the party was spellbound, somewhere between fascinated and horrified. He added the final detail. 'The beds – in the rooms. The beds were all child-sized.'

'Get out of there,' said Lucas immediately. 'They've got some weird shit going on and you ought to get out of there. What if that's why they wanted you? *Someone under twelve*, they said.'

'I'm not giving it up,' said Mike firmly.

'You're going to end up as some test subject, locked in a cell in the middle of the lab! C'mon, Mike!'

'No. I have to find out what's going on.'

'That's awesome,' said Dustin. Lucas glared at him. 'What? Totally creepy, but still awesome.'

'You're not going to quit the job, are you?' asked Will, looking piercingly at Mike. Mike shook his head defiantly, and Will nodded, thinking.

'Okay then. We need to put some defensive measures in place. Insurance. Can you take a Supercom in with you?'

'No good,' said Mike. 'They you leave your possessions on arrival. There's no way I could hide it either, those things are huge.'

'Not Dustin's one,' said Will. 'The headset he uses for biking. You could smuggle that in and then you'd be able to contact us.'

'I'd need to be alone to use it, and that's a risk in itself,' replied Mike shortly. 'No.'

'Then contact us before you leave and after you get back, every time. We'll keep a watch going and if you don't come out for too long, we rescue you.'

Lucas and Dustin nodded emphatically. Mike softened a little in the face of their collective concern for him.

'Thanks, guys.'

'But still make sure you find out what's going on in there,' said Dustin, after a moment. 'Because whatever it is, it sounds like the real shit.'

'Dustin!'

'What?'

Ω

'Hello, the Wheeler Household. Who's calling?'

'Mrs Wheeler? This is Dr Brenner, at Hawkins Lab. I must inform you that circumstances force us to speed up Michael's next session with us.'

'Oh... oh. But he was there for the first time only yesterday! You said he had until Wednesday!'

'Complications have arisen. However, we are well within the contract to acquire his assistance at any time we at the lab deem necessary. I will be there to pick him up in ten minutes.'

'I-'

Click.

Ω

'Operative Two to all channels, come in. Operative Two to all, come in. This is an emergency activation. I am greenlighting Operation Sentinel. Do you copy?'

'Roger that, Mike. Operation Sentinel activated. How long until they get you? Over.'

'Ten minutes. No... eight. Operatives Three and Four, do you copy? Dustin? Will? Over.'

'Operative Three here. I copy. We'll give you until first class tomorrow, then we're storming that place after you. Got it?'

'Thanks, Will. Got it.'

'Don't forget the science! Find out some cool stuff for us!'

'Roger, Dustin. Over and out.'

'See if they've got aliens! You know, green ones! Long fingers! Big eyes- oh, he's gone.'

Ω

'Ah, Michael,' said Dr Brenner, as Mike entered the back of the white van. 'How are you doing?'

'Alright.' Mike sat down awkwardly. 'I wasn't expecting to be back so soon. What is it? Is something happening?'

Brenner leaned forward. 'We've hit a slight difficulty with one of our more delicate charges. Tell me, how do you find you work with Dr Hanson?'

Mike shifted a little as the van started to move. 'I've only worked with him once, Doctor. But... he doesn't really need me. I don't know why you wanted me if my job is just to help him.'

Brenner smiled a little. 'No one likes feeling redundant. No, Michael, your job is not simply to help Dr Hanson. We have something much more difficult and more much important planned for you. Something that you alone can help us with. I wasn't intending to introduce you

to the project so soon but we are encountering... problems.' He looked at Mike frankly. 'We need your help now. Are you willing to give it?'

A fleeting image of restraints and operating chairs and doors without locks slipped into Mike's mind. He ignored it. 'Yes, Doctor,' he said, excitement making his voice crack.

Brenner's smile widened an inch. It was wide, and friendly. Open. Honest. 'Thank you, Michael. I think then it is time to take you to Block 011.'

Ω

'This is the heart of Hawkins Laboratory, and the site of the most important work we do here,' said Brenner, as the elevator sped upwards. Mike looked around, trying to appear as if he had not already seen this elevator before.

'What work is that?' he asked.

'You'll see soon enough.'

The elevator opened with a *ping* and Brenner led Mike down a corridor that was eerily familiar. Mike stared around him as he walked. The floor he was passing through was an exact copy of the one ten floors below in Block 001, except in pristine condition and obviously still in frequent use. Scientists in white coats clustered around screens. A low mechanical beeping echoed in the background. Brenner strode past the activity with barely a glance, while Mike followed behind, trying to see everything going on. His head swung too and fro as he saw something new to goggle at.

At the end of the corridor, where the cell had been on Block 001, was a locked door similar enough to give Mike shivers just looking at it. Brenner swiped his card, input a short code into the keypad, and stood aside, gesturing Mike inside.

'Go on, and through the door in front of you,' he said. 'I will explain everything after.'

Mike hesitated on the threshold, not quite able to shake his

foreboding. Brenner couldn't trap him in there. The party was coming for him if he wasn't back by the next day. Taking a breath and glancing at Brenner, who smiled reassuringly, Mike stepped into the room and heard the hiss of the door closing behind him.

The room was blank, save for a second door on the opposite wall. Mike walked slowly towards it, his footsteps seeming loud in the sudden silence. The walls around him muted the noise of the lab – the silence was thick enough that he could have been in space, or deep under the sea. Mike reached a hand towards the door in front of him and, trembling in a mixture of trepidation and excitement, unlocked it.

The door swung open, light from the antechamber spilling into the dim room in front of him. Mike saw it all – new and in good condition. The table, with one chair. The bed. The childlike picture drawn on one wall. The lack of windows. He glanced around, and started.

There was someone sitting by the bed.

Mike blinked, then his mouth was moving before his brain caught up.

'H- hello?' he asked. 'Hello?'

They didn't respond or look up at him. Mike peered forwards, getting over his initial shock. They were small – even smaller than Mike, and with their hair clipped short into a buzzcut. They were crouched, huddled in on themselves in the corner farthest from the door, thin arms sticking out from the baggy sleeves and clutched tightly around their legs. They were wearing a hospital gown of some sort.

'Hello?' he said, softer this time. He hesitated, then knelt down near them. There was a long moment, then the figure looked up at Mike, and his breath caught in his throat.

It was a girl. Her face was soft and pale and her eyes were wide and large and a deep, terrified brown.

'Oh!' he said, surprised. And then, 'Hello. Hello.' He realised he'd said it again, and started to flush a little. 'What's your name?' he pressed

on doggedly, in the face of his rapidly-heating cheeks and the girls' unresponsiveness.

Nothing. She watched him intently, silent. As soon as he met her stare, her large eyes widened and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

'It's okay,' he said, and didn't know exactly why. 'I won't hurt you. My name's Mike.' He didn't know what Brenner expected of him or who this girl with the brown eyes was, but she was frightened, even he could see that much. She didn't need to be frightened of him. Mike was sure of that.

'Mike,' he repeated slowly. 'Do you understand?'

The girl tilted her head slightly, and Mike realised she was nodding. 'Oh! Good! You do!'

The girl nodded imperceptibly again. She swallowed thickly. '*Here to-?*' she whispered, and made a gesture of a syringe injecting her in the arm with one hand.

'No! No,' reassured Mike. He reached forwards towards her, and she started back, shuffling further in on herself and pressing her back against the wall. Mike dropped his hand hurriedly.

'Sorry. Sorry. Look, I'm not going to touch you, alright? Here.' He shuffled back a few paces and traced a line on the floor. 'I'll stay on this side of the line, and you'll stay on that side. No one touches anyone. Alright?'

Brown eyes swung curiously back up to meet him. There was a moment, then the girl stretched out, uncurling herself slowly and sitting back in her previous position.

'Line,' she whispered, and Mike nodded enthusiastically.

'Yeah.' He bit back the first three questions that sprang to his mind, looking for a way to ask her that wouldn't startle her or end with her just staring at him. 'Do-?'

There was a soft click behind him, and in a heartbeat the girl was huddled back in a ball, making herself as small as possible. Mike

turned and saw Dr Brenner had entered the room quietly, and now stood towering over the kneeling children.

'I see you've met each other,' he said. 'This is Michael Wheeler, who I told you about.' He glanced down at Mike. 'Come. I imagine you have questions.'

Mike nodded and sprang to his feet, following as Brenner turned on his heel and left. He hesitated a moment before turning back in the doorway and looking down to see the girl was watching him go.

'What's your name?' he asked again. The girl, the girl with the large brown eyes, merely stared at him. One hand clenched around her left wrist. A hand touched Mike on the shoulder, and Brenner's voice spoke behind him, telling him to come. Gently but firmly, Mike was steered away, and both doors between the girl with brown eyes and the rest of the lab firmly shut.

'That,' said Brenner, as they began to walk back down the hall, 'is the single most important room in the lab. Follow me. I will explain everything.'

Well that became longer than I anticipated. Oh well. Next chapter Mike and El get to know each other properly, so watch this space and if you haven't already, make sure to follow. If you're feeling particularly generous, leave a review telling me what you think so far.